

The “Partnership” Issue: Amid A Lot of Options, There’s Only One Choice

For years, the people who run the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi have fought to keep their special interest \$20 million of Mississippi’s tobacco settlement money. Now, they realize they will likely lose in court and have asked legislators to give them the money directly. It’s not that simple. We can’t just throw \$20 million at the Partnership every year without a serious evaluation of how the money can best be used. In addition, the Partnership has to be subject to the same oversight and audit requirements as others that receive taxpayer money.

It’s time to stop the charade!

Responsible state officials have argued that the \$20 million a year belongs to taxpayers and thus is subject to legislative appropriations, not a sweetheart court-directed scheme.

No public accountability

No matter how good the Partnership’s intentions, it has given away millions of taxpayers to special interests under the guise of encouraging young people to stop smoking. Its money has kept one Jackson ad agency alive. The Partnership pumped millions of dollars into black churches and resisted attempts to discover whether the money actually helped people stop smoking.

Unconstitutional

Three years ago, the Legislature’s own watchdogs – the PEER Committee – found that the court order diverting \$20 million from the tobacco lawsuit payments to the state into the private Partnership was illegal because it circumvented the legislative appropriations process.

Free rein

The Partnership was allowed to operate without oversight or audit – a special deal not allowed for other state-funded projects.

Politics Over People

The Partnership for a Health Mississippi has engaged in politics over people – it spent \$20,000 for a statewide newspaper ad praising former Attorney General Mike Moore for winning an award. Just one of those ads would have paid for asthma breathing treatments for 28 Medicaid patients.

Anti-tobacco programs for less

The Partnership does some good work, but it comes at an extraordinarily high price – \$20 million a year is twice as much as the state spends fighting the scourge of illegal drugs and \$7 million more than what the state spends on agriculture. Mississippi can continue its anti-tobacco programs through state agencies for much less cost and just as effectively.

Million-dollar lawyers

Several Mississippi trial lawyers became millionaires, even billionaires, off the original tobacco settlement. They could fund anti-tobacco efforts themselves instead of buying yachts and jet airplanes and building expensive homes.

More dollars for health care

Thanks to the federal government's 3-to-1 match, Mississippi could invest the Partnership's \$20 million into Medicaid and turn it into more than \$80 million a year; that would extend health care to more than 50,000 children every year.

The bottom line

Through the years, the original stated purpose of the tobacco settlement – to recoup the cost of treating smoking-related illnesses through the Mississippi Medicaid program – has been forgotten.

Tobacco settlement money belongs to taxpayers, not to a private organization that spends public money without public oversight. Let's make the Partnership accountable for money spent in the past and in the future. Let's make the Partnership work with state agencies responsible for health programs. Let's rein in the special interests that have let the private Partnership run away with public dollars.

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